

Book Review:

Architecture, Ethics and the Personhood of Place

Gregory Caicco, editor. University Press of New England, 2007

According to Gregory Caicco, the editor of this volume emanating out of a symposium entitled “Ethics in Place: Architecture, Memory and Environmental Poetics” held at Arizona State University in 2004, at this point in time four distinct approaches to ethics in architecture can be discerned: critiques from within the dominant tradition of “self-regulating techno-capitalism,” “postmodern resistance” that seeks to dethrone enlightenment rationality, “the otherwise of phenomenology and hermeneutics” that would have us pay greater heed to the knowledge of the body and the importance of sentiments, and now, Caicco hopes to establish, “the personhood of place” (pp. 10-16) the approach most closely aligned with environmental ethics and one which emphasizes the originating force of site in design deliberations. The book’s eleven essays are loosely grouped under two main headings, “Cities of Contemplation” and “The Teachings of Place.”

Inaugurating Part I, Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa contributes a series of brief observations, reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. In “A Spiritual City?” Philip Sheldrake presents more of a coherent argument as he seeks to recover a sense of the sacred in the modern city. Ultimately, he argues for a new attentiveness to motives beyond mere utility or self-absorbed hedonism so that the spiritual dimension of the city can be regained. Edward Casey’s essay on “Ethics and Place in the Wake of 9/11” is of a more historical account of the sometimes self-organizing and temporary, sometimes imposed and long-term development of places in which to commemorate the destruction wrought on 9/11. Richard Kearney explores similar ground in his discussion of the Irish Hunger Memorial on the southern tip of Manhattan Island. Rounding out the first section, Susan Stewart’s engaging meander “Reading a Drawer” contemplates the potential philosophical implications of the detritus of contemporary life.

Part II, “The Teachings of Place,” opens with Alberto Pérez-Gómez’ indictment of current architectural educational practices. Against what he sees as the ascendancy of

prosaic trade-school models of education he argues for an education that imparts the intellectual skills required for students to explore the tension between the prose and poetry of architecture through play, critical hermeneutics, and development of praxis. Those who found philosopher Karsten Harries' *The Ethical Function of Architecture* to be a tough slog are in for a pleasant surprise with his elegant essay "The Ethical Significance of Environmental Beauty." Harries begins with the question "Is an environmental aesthetics necessary?" concluding that it is indeed a precondition to the affirmation of a world irreducible to pure human instrumentalism. Stacy Alaimo's standout essay "This is About Pleasure" seeks to rehabilitate hedonism as a basis for an ethic. The trick, she thinks, is to cast a wide enough net to include the pleasurable inhabitation of other species beyond the solely human in our constructions. David Abram's "Wood and Stone" casts the net wider still, somewhat whimsically contemplating human existence in buildings from the building's point of view. The essay by Jace Weaver and Laura Adams Weaver, "The Adamant of Time" presents something of a survey of recent works by Native American architects. They identify the essential characteristics of a Native American approach to contemporary architecture: sensuous engagement with location, consensus-building with consumers, and mirth or sensuous joy in design. Lastly, Sebnem Yucel-Young's "Identity Calling" seeks to broaden what had implicitly, if not explicitly, been a North-America-centric discussion; impressing on readers the inherently asymmetrical demands that calls for regionalism place on the "Rest" of the non-Western world. A diverse group, but for the most part each does fulfill the editor's mandate to examine a facet of the ethics of place.

Why do we need a distinctive ethics of place in architectural discourse? Based on the essays presented in the volume, two likely responses delineating an underlying tension in the field present themselves. First, many feel that the placemaking inherent in the creation of architecture might serve to countervail the rootlessness--the peripatetic nature--of contemporary life at the bottom of both industrial society's destructive practices against the earth as well as a variety of social ills. In this scenario, a well-articulated architecture of place can deliver up much-needed exemplars of working with the earth instead of against it. Juhani Pallasmaa expresses exactly this sort of confidence in architecture's curative powers: "Architecture articulates the experiencing and

understanding of the existential condition; it relates, mediates, and projects signification.” (p. 41) Pérez-Gómez asserts: “good architecture...offers societies a place for existential orientation.” (p. 121) Jace Weaver and Laura Ann Weaver find instruction in Native American architect Douglas Cardinal’s work which dares to invest such projects as Grand Prairie Regional College in Alberta, Canada, The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, and the Canadian Museum of Civilization with highly symbolic content. Richard Kearney finds in the “hermeneutics of memory exchange” provided by memorials like the Irish Famine Memorial a type of absolution, or pardon, not to the perpetrators of atrocity or human suffering surely, but to those whom the memorial engages with its preservation of a moment of intense suffering. This pardoning of future generations accomplished by the best memorial architecture is itself a curative; a release to move forward provided by the safe encapsulation of memory.

In the second scenario, architecture itself is the patient having succumbed almost a century ago to the seduction of industrialization, placelessness of modernism (the International Style a veritable poster child for the erosion of locality), and instrumentalist appropriation of the world: It is in need of a complete overhaul. Philip Sheldrake’s search for spirituality in the contemporary city is a call to action of this second variety. He urges “planners and architects and their clients to recover a sense that their task is to enhance people’s lives” (p. 65) far beyond such narrow instrumentalist goals of making more money or reducing commute times. Yucel-Young wants an end to destructive stereotyping of non-western architecture, advising “A reeducation within professional architectural discourse concerning non-Western cultures is needed, especially on alternative conceptions of modernity.” (p. 222) Pérez-Gómez also thinks the place to begin overturning destructive ways of thinking is with education: “Our new central concern should be to prepare future architects to use their imaginations to make poetic artifacts rather than plan buildings—to engage dimensions of consciousness that are usually stifled by our present educational paradigms.” (p. 124) Karsten Harries’ diagnosis reaches even deeper: “Artifice threatens to embrace the environment so completely that at moments nature seems to all but vanish in the embrace” (p.139). Is architecture ready to spread its wings, or instead should it turn inward to heal itself? No doubt both the restorative “architecture can do x” and the diagnostic “architecture is lacking x” scenarios

engage important truths but its frustrating that the inherent tension between these two positions is utterly unexplored.

Compared to other worldly disciplines--medicine or law for instance-- architectural ethics is still in its infancy. As engaging and as admirable as many of these essays are, what is most sorely missing in these early explorative days for architectural ethics is a consensus over just what an architectural ethics is about; even in this relatively narrowed exploration of the ethics of place one is left with the sense that a truly philosophical discourse has yet to launch. A philosophical discourse is one that is both self-aware and self-critical, that builds on the achievements of the past while keeping an eye toward opening up interesting discussions for the future, and is devoted to the unglamorous business of digging into difficult topics instead of the easier work of roaming for opportunities. In a volume devoted to the architecture of place, it is altogether too tempting to observe that it seems everyone is still kicking over the terrain; still looking for the nuggets on the surface. In a discipline in its infancy, this lack of commitment is understandable, yet a sense of a lost opportunity prevails. No theory of architectural placemaking is offered and doubtful one will tacitly emerge. The authors are neither critical of one another, nor do they refer to a common intellectual heritage. Thus, the probability that this project has established the intellectual foundations for sustained argumentation has to be ranked as low.

Why has architectural ethics yet to move forward in any serious way? Two culprits come to mind. The first is the legacy of architecture's being defined before all else as an art, and therefore largely autonomous from moral consideration. The architecture world's leaders have traditionally been its artistic innovators whose triumphs are seen to lead to greater design autonomy and away from pressures to be responsive, i.e. conforming, to the wishes of others. These artistic leaders are held out to have achieved the sort of uncompromising practices and design values for which the rest of the profession should strive. Indeed, some of its greatest formgivers (Wright, Mies, Kahn) have led destructive personal lives but their wretched treatment of others is allowed as part and parcel of an artistic temperament and is generally regarded as having done no serious damage to the quality of their artistic output. Thus, responsiveness to others--being a "good person"--in the architecture world entails connotations of weakness.

Disdain by the artist for the prosaic, sordid, everyday of budgets, review committees, management, and constructibility has led to the likely second culprit: The profession of architecture has all too often seen itself from a subordinate, relatively powerless, position in the construction economy which unsurprisingly discourages thoughts of responsibility, much less taking charge to effect societal change. Low pay scales, erosion of turf to other disciplines, and increased scrutiny are the most obvious manifestations of the profession's tenuous position.

This is not to allege that all is grim. Signs of hope do exist. The profession has been moderately successful in formulating goals beyond self-preservation and turning these goals into legislative initiative. The causes of energy efficiency and sustainable building are growing at a fast clip. As the profession has become much more business savvy, profitability no longer connotes selling-out. A new realism has set in that architecture must not hold itself aloof from the world—wistful for that idealized but ultimately destructive paternalism of the architectural patron—and that much good can be done through sullyng one's hands in political, economic, and societal engagement.

The essays presented here, then, highlight another tension in the nascent architectural ethics: to what degree should an architectural ethic engage the contemporary capitalistic, instrumentalist, rationalized, compartmentalized, transitory, and largely placeless world we now find ourselves living in, and to what degree should it instead seek to transcend such conditions? As appealing as the idea of rising above it all, starting from scratch, and rejecting the compromised often is, the path of engagement seems to me the much more promising. This path requires not only an architectural ethic, but, as several of the essays intimate, a politics of architecture as well.

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